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# The Manufacturing of the MENA Race

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Gabrielle Ghaderi

### The Manufacturing of the MENA Race

If I were residing in the United States in the year 1900, I would be considered Asian. Today, in the U.S., I am white, yet in three years I may be considered something entirely different; I may be considered to be of Middle Eastern and North African descent, or MENA. How is it possible that the same set of DNA, the same genetics, could be classified into three different racial categories, merely based upon the period in which that particular racial composition is placed? The answer is simple: it is possible because race is not a natural phenomenon, but manufactured. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates proposes this idea by stating, “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined indubitable feature of the natural world...But race is the child of racism, not the father” (7). Following this interpretation of race, it is apparent how the evolution of the Middle Eastern race has been motivated by racism and human intervention, not by happenstance. The malleability of racial categorization in both United States history and globally confirms the concept that race is the result of racism, not the origin.

The proposition that race is fabricated as a result of racism is distinctly noted in the history of the Middle Eastern race in the United States. In the late 19th century to early 20th century, a wave of anti-Asian sentiment struck the U.S. resulting in a bout of anti-Asian legislation restricting Asian immigration, the most notable being the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Middle Eastern people at this time were considered Asian, and in an effort to circumvent the impact of immigration laws, sought to be counted as white. This endeavor was accomplished in 1909 when the Department of Justice construed the

term white to include those of Middle Eastern descent. This classification was satisfactory until the late 1900s and early 2000s, particularly September 11, 2001.

Hate crimes against Middle Eastern people in the United States rose following the September 11 attacks; thus a movement made for a new racial category known as MENA was formed. In 2010, a campaign was conceived to encourage Middle Eastern and North African citizens to write in their race on that year's census rather than check off white. Now, further efforts are being made for the 2020 census to add a MENA option alongside pre-existing racial categories. Where the categorization change in 1909 was made to avoid racial discrimination, the present day movement, instead, is being made to document discrimination. This history aligns flawlessly with Coates' notion that race is an output of racism.

Middle Eastern people are not campaigning for a separate category to document the shared culture unique from others around them but to licitly validate the dissimilarity experienced in a post 9/11 era. Ta-Nehisi Coates supports this in *Between the World and Me* by discussing the sense of being a stranger, of not belonging based on appearance. The estrangement he felt because of his black body is a sentiment commonplace to those of a Middle Eastern body. The false understanding that a person is intrinsically violent or predatory is shared between the two peoples for this perception is not a result of race, but as a result of racism, as a result of that which has been done to them, not by them.

Furthermore, if race were a feature of nature, there would be consistency in racial classification in both time and place. Consistencies in time have been proven to be false, based on the evidence that one set of racial and ethnic background in the United States

has managed to be classified as three distinct racial groupings in the span of just over a century. Racial categorization based upon location proves to be equally inconsistent. A person of Middle Eastern descent in the United States is considered white. The same person now living in Canada, becomes West Asian, while in the United Kingdom, he or she is considered to be “Other Asian.” The fact that merely crossing a border or an ocean can change one’s race entirely denies any validity in there being genetic consistencies in race.

The manipulation of race throughout time and place supports Ta-Nehisi Coates’ notion that race is manufactured. Being of Middle Eastern descent, I have viewed race as a convoluted and discrepant construct. Based on the history of the Middle Eastern people, and the idea of being a stranger, my sense of race and racism proves to be comparable to those communicated in *Between the World and Me*. The way race has been formed and reformed insinuates that it is reacting to its catalyst, racism. Race is not equivalent to a hurricane, brought upon by nature, its occurrence unavoidable; it is a weapon, conceived, manufactured, aimed, and fired at the hands of racism.

Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.